

# Helping Children Cope with Disaster

*Earthquakes...  
tornados...fires...floods...hurricanes...  
hazardous materials spills...*

Disasters strike quickly and without warning. These events can be traumatic for adults, but they are frightening for children if they don't know what to do.

During a disaster, children may have to leave their homes and daily routines. They may become anxious, confused or frightened. As an adult, you'll need to cope with the disaster and also give your child crucial guidance about how to respond.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency, the American Red Cross and the Harford County Government have prepared this brochure to help *you* help your child cope. Ultimately, you should decide what is best for your child, but consider using these suggestions as guidelines.



## Children and Their Response to Disaster

Children depend on daily routines: They wake up, eat breakfast, go to school, play with friends. When emergencies or disasters interrupt this routine, children become anxious.

In a disaster, they'll look to you and other adults for help. How *you* react to an emergency gives them clues about how to act. If you react with alarm, a child may become more scared. They see our fear as proof that the danger is real.

Children's fears also may stem from their imagination, and you should take these feelings seriously. A child who *feels* afraid *is* afraid. Your words and actions can provide reassurance.

Feelings of fear are healthy and natural for adults and children. But as an adult, you need to keep control of the situation. When you're sure that danger has passed, concentrate on your child's emotional needs by asking the child to explain what's troubling him or her. Your response during this "problem time" may have a lasting impact.

Be aware that after a disaster, children are *most afraid* that --

- ' the event will happen again.
- ' someone will be injured or killed.
- ' they will be separated from the family.
- ' they will be left alone.

# HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH DISASTER

## Advice to Parents:

### Prepare for Disaster



You can create a Family Disaster Plan by taking four simple steps. First, learn what hazards exist in your community and how to prepare for each. Then meet with your family to discuss what you would do, as a group, in each situation. Next, take steps to prepare your family for disaster such as: post emergency phone numbers, select an out-of-state family contact, assemble disaster supply kits for each member of your household and install smoke detectors on each level of your home. Finally, practice your family Disaster Plan so that everyone will remember what to do when a disaster does occur.

#### ‘ **Develop and practice a Family Disaster Plan.**

Contact your local Emergency Management office, your local Red Cross chapter or visit your local branch library for materials that describe how your family can create a disaster plan. *Everyone in the household, including children, should play a part in the planning process.*

‘ **Teach your child how to recognize danger signals.** Make sure your child knows what smoke detectors, fire alarms and local community warning systems (horns, sirens) sound like.



‘ **Explain how to call for help.** Teach your child how and when to call for help. Check the telephone directory for local emergency phone numbers and post these numbers by all telephones. You live in a 911 service area; teach your child how to call 911.

‘ **Help your child memorize important family information.** Children should memorize their family name, address and phone number. They should also know where to meet in case of an emergency. Some children may not be old enough to memorize the information. They could carry a small index card to give to an adult or babysitter that lists emergency information.

### TEACHING YOUR CHILD HOW TO CALL FOR HELP

Teach your child how and when to call for help. They should always call 911 in an emergency. Check the telephone directory for other local emergency numbers.

Even very young children can be taught how and when to call for emergency assistance. If your child can't read, the chart on the next page has pictures that may help them identify the correct number to call in the event of an emergency.

As you explain each picture, have your child color the symbol on the emergency phone number chart. Doing so may help your child remember who they should call in an emergency.

# Emergency Phone Numbers

My Family Name: \_\_\_\_\_

My Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

My Address: \_\_\_\_\_

My Town: \_\_\_\_\_

My County: \_\_\_\_\_



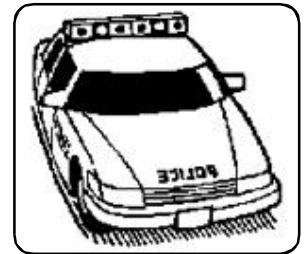
**9-1-1**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Ambulance



**9-1-1**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Fire



**9-1-1**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Police/Sheriff



\_\_\_\_\_  
Mother



\_\_\_\_\_  
Father



\_\_\_\_\_  
Other

## After the Disaster: Time for Recovery



Immediately after the disaster, try to reduce your child's fear and anxiety.

- **Keep the family together.** While you look for housing and assistance, you may want to leave your child with relatives or friends. Instead, keep the family together as much as possible. Children get anxious, and they'll worry that parents won't return.
- **Calmly and firmly explain the situation.** As best as you can, tell children what you know about the disaster. Explain what will happen next. For example, say, "Tonight, we will all stay together in the shelter." Crouch down and talk to children at *their* eye level.
- **Encourage children to talk.** Let children talk about the disaster as much as they want. Encourage children to describe what they're feeling. Listen to what they say. If possible, include the entire family in the discussion.

- **Include children in recovery activities.** Give children chores that are their responsibility. This will help children feel they are part of the recovery. Having a task will help them understand that everything will be all right.

You can help children cope by understanding what causes their anxieties and fears. Reassure them with firmness and love. Your child will realize that life will eventually return to normal. If a child does not respond to the above suggestions, seek help from a mental health specialist.

### Local Sponsorship:



**Harford County**  
Division of Emergency Operations  
2220 Ady Road  
Forest Hill, MD 21050  
410-638-4900



**American Red Cross**  
**Harford County**  
122 South Main Street  
Bel Air, MD 21014  
410-838-4568